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SUBJECT Walter Pincus Discusses Iran Negotiations

J BRIAN NAYLOR: There are reports today that President Reagan personally approved U.S. contacts with Iran over the last year and a half. The contacts were part of a secret program aimed at gaining the release of American hostages being held in Lebanon. Washington Post reporter ~~Walter Pincus~~ says the President suspended the program for a time when some of his Cabinet members expressed opposition.

WALTER PINCUS: The President listened to the arguments pro and con, in which both Shultz and Weinberger voiced their objections to the program. And as a result, he called a halt to the a program which by then had helped obtain the release of the Reverend Benjamin Weir in September of '85.

NAYLOR: Why did he call that operation to a halt?

PINCUS: The arguments, as I understand it, are some that you're hearing now: that, publicly, we had made a major point that you cannot negotiate with terrorists. It was the opposite of our public policy and we were enforcing that policy as far as our allies knew and as far as the country knew.

NAYLOR: Well, how long did this hiatus, if you will, last?

PINCUS: I don't know the exact amount of time. It was a period of months. And ironically, during those months the hostage families became more and more public in their sentiment about how the President, they said, wasn't doing enough. And so I think during the interim period pressure again built up to try to do something about the hostages. And the President and the White House were frustrated because, in this particular case, the

hostages [sic] were not responsive to any other pressure except, on the one hand, the alternative of trying to get the people out of Kuwait, which the President vowed he would not do; on the other hand, the entreaties and the possibilities that the Iranians, by getting secret shipments of arms, could do something.

And as I understand it, the President finally decided that he would renew the program. But he kept it even more secret than it had been before because it was obvious that the few top-level officials in the State Department were very much against it, and the White House and the President himself didn't want them to know it had been reinstated.

NAYLOR: And so how much more secret was this resumed operation?

PINCUS: I can't tell you the exact numbers. It's my general understanding it perhaps was just limited to the Cabinet members.

NAYLOR: Did the President give his approval, specifically, that arms be shipped to Iran?

PINCUS: As I understand the situation, that was the focus of discussion. And clearly, the fact that it went on again could only have been taken place -- could only have taken place with the approval of the President.

NAYLOR: The President approved a plan to send arms to Iran. Wasn't that in violation, though, of executive orders that specifically prohibit that kind of trade?

PINCUS: I think it's hard for us right now, it's certainly hard for me, to project exactly how it was carried out. I have not been able to find out the details of exactly how the arms were transferred.

I do know as a fact, however, that arms were not taken from the United States and sent to Iran. There were transfers of arms, but they were indirect and they were not handled by us. The main role that we played was that this government, which was actively attempting to stop other countries from shipping arms to Iran, both publicly and privately, in certain cases decided to look aside, not to interfere; in some cases, perhaps, to help facilitate. But in no cases, do I understand, arms went from U.S. stockpiles to Iran.

A NAYLOR: Walter, you have reported that while CIA Director William Casey was aware of the go-ahead for direct or indirect arms sales to the Iranians, that the CIA itself was not

involved in any of those transactions, or not involved in this whole operation. Why is that?

PINCUS: I have been told that, and I've been told the reason was the very calculated one that it is the type of operation that would, under the law, have to have been reported to the House and Senate Intelligence committees. And in order to avoid making that report, they did not turn it over to the CIA.

NAYLOR: What does this operation, in your mind, say about the way the Reagan Administration is formulating its foreign policy?

PINCUS: It was described to me as a question of approach. A small group of people in the White House, loyal to the President, determined to get things done that he believes should be done, found a way, they felt, to get the hostages out at a time when the American people and the President wanted to do something like that. They ran up against a State Department and a Defense Department that is rooted in longer-term diplomacy and foreign policy interests, in which the pragmatic getting out of the hostages could backfire and undermine much more long-term important objectives. And the people closest to the President represented the pragmatic group, and they won out.

NAYLOR: Washington Post reporter Walter Pincus.